

Some Pitfalls In Picture Interpretation

There is a wide-held belief that what the photographer intended is the correct interpretation but this is not necessarily so. The photographer may or may not know what a picture actually communicates—or what it communicates may be entirely different from what was intended. And, some photographers are unaware of what they intended when they photographed. Unless photographers analyze their pictures, they will not know what their pictures communicate.

We should keep in mind how the creative process works: The mental atmosphere surrounding a photographer may produce a “seed-thought” which drops into the subconscious mind of the photographer. After an incubation period, gestation occurs, and then some excitant in the photographer's environment will cause him or her to create a photograph. Intent may be irrelevant because here the creation of the photograph has nothing to do with the conscious intent of the photographer.

There are more than one possible valid interpretations to a picture. Different people will usually get different associations from a picture—even though their associations may be similar. There is no one, correct interpretation.

There are different interpretation perspectives to a picture. Each perspective is limited—none are complete in themselves. An interpreter may give the picture impersonal, universal, mythical and archetypal status. Or, a picture can be interpreted psychoanalytically. Most art historians lean towards an interpretation based upon the formal design elements of a picture—while some critics interpret pictures as manifestations of larger, societal developments and social history as well as photography and art history.

A hybrid approach is a good one because each approach in itself is limiting. The process of interpreting photographs is complex, and there is no one way critics use to arrive at their understandings of images. Each of these approaches has advantages and limitations. Some approaches are combined by critics. Each of them could be tried to see how they fit an image or how comfortably they fit the critic.

What is most important to remember is that interpreting a photograph is a matter of building a reasonable understanding based on demonstrable evidence. Good interpretations are not willy-nilly responses, nor are they dogmatic pronouncements. They are reasonable arguments built by critics, and they are always open to revision. Some interpretations are better than others because they better fit the photograph, offer greater insight, and are more compelling. Because there are so many critics with so many world views and ideological persuasions, there will be multiple interpretations that are reasonable and compelling, even though different. However, this diversity is enriching. The more perspectives that you approach a picture from, the better. Each approach can only provide you with a piece of the puzzle. No one approach is complete in itself. The question is: How much time and effort are you willing to invest in trying to understand a picture? Do you want to complete your analysis of a picture quickly—or do you want to understand the picture more thoroughly?

Don't ignore your feelings and associations when interpreting a picture. Looking at pictures should not be solely an intellectual endeavor. Ask yourself what is it that you are feeling? Why are you having those feelings? What in the picture triggers such feelings in us. By being attuned to our feelings when viewing images, we can begin to identify the connotations of images. Our feelings are a starting point for interpretation. But, it is important to ask ourselves: Are my feelings supported by the formal design elements in the picture? Be careful not to read into a picture what isn't there!

It is important to examine the context in which a photograph has been placed. Context strongly affects how a photograph is understood. The meaning of a photograph can be altered by adding text—or by placing it with other photographs. If a photograph is misplaced in an exhibit, for example, accurate interpretation will not be possible.

Find out as much about the photographer as you can. Biographical, historical, religious, philosophical, sociological, cultural, and psychological information about the photographer will be helpful. What culture does the photographer come from? Look at a variety of work by the photographer in order to broaden your understanding still further.

How well have you interpreted the symbols in a photograph? Objects have symbolic meanings in pictures and there can be psychological meanings, mythological meanings, cultural meanings, or archetypal meanings. (Basically, the meanings of archetypal symbols are shared by various cultures from the present time to the very distant past.) It is important to remember that symbols vary in meaning from one culture to another. For example, the lily is one of the most ambiguous of all flower symbols. It can be associated with Christian piety, purity and innocence but having associations with fecundity and erotic love in older traditions. In China, the grasshopper is linked with fertility. But, in some countries, it can be a symbol of cosmic disorder.

Beware of blocks that you might have to the understanding of pictures. They can prevent or adversely affect any accurate reading or interpretation of a picture. See: Blocks to Understanding in The Aesthetic Theories of Minor White or Similarities and Differences in the Aesthetic Theories of Steiglitz, Weston, Adams, and White.

Finally, beware of the descriptors used by a critic. They may not be value-neutral. They may suggest approval or disapproval. In published criticism, descriptors are rarely value free. Critics color their descriptors according to whether they are positive or negative about the work, and they use descriptors that are simultaneously descriptive and evaluative to influence the reader's view of the work. Critics attempt to be persuasive in their writing. The reader needs to sort the critic's description from judgments and value-neutral or value-laden descriptions—however subtly they are written, so that he/she can more intelligently understand and appreciate the image.